

FOOD SAFETY AND INSPECTION SERVICE

Submitted for the Record

Statement of

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Before the

Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development,

Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies

Madam Chairwoman and members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) fiscal year (FY) 2008 budget request for the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), and to address current food safety issues of concern to FSIS.

First, let me take this opportunity to congratulate you, Representative DeLauro, in your new role as the Chair of the Subcommittee. I would particularly like to thank you and the other members of the Subcommittee for your strong commitment to the public health goals that are core to FSIS' mission. Thank you for providing FSIS with the resources necessary to ensure that meat, poultry, and egg products distributed in commerce for use as human food are safe, secure, wholesome, and accurately labeled.

As you know, FSIS is charged with administering and enforcing the Federal Meat Inspection Act, the Poultry Products Inspection Act, the Egg Products Inspection Act, portions of the Agricultural Marketing Act, and the regulations that implement these laws. FSIS also ensures compliance with the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act, which requires that all livestock be handled and slaughtered in a humane manner.

At FSIS, our enforcement of these Federal laws and their underlying regulations is rooted in science. Since our decisions are driven by what science reveals, we must constantly evolve to fulfill our public health mandate and stay ahead of the ever-changing threats to America's food supply. Therefore, FSIS will continue to work with our public health stakeholders to modernize and enhance inspection, food safety, and food defense.

I am pleased to report that we are making significant progress. FSIS' scientific policies have made a measurable, positive impact on public health. For evidence, you need only look to foodborne illness data from the Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) covering a recent seven-year span. In April 2006, CDC reported sustained reductions in foodborne illnesses caused by *E. coli* O157:H7, *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Campylobacter* and *Salmonella* from the 1996-1998 baseline through 2005. As I will discuss later, the foodborne illness reductions correlate with the reductions we find in product samples. However, we believe more can – and will – be done. To attain a higher level of food safety, our commitment to policies based in science has been the driving force behind implementing a more robust risk-based inspection system.

The foundation of this system will be the ability to anticipate and quickly respond to food safety challenges before they have a negative impact on public health. While FSIS already incorporates risk assessments in our approach to food safety, our goal is to further strengthen the system so that inspection program personnel may more effectively anticipate problems before they happen. A more robust risk-based inspection system will ensure that our agency's resources are more focused on identifying and correcting problems. That is why FSIS is currently working in cooperation with its food safety partners at all levels to achieve an optimal risk-based inspection system.

Of course, attaining our public health goals is not possible without the dedicated public health servants stationed throughout the country and in laboratories, plants, and import houses everyday. In FY 2006, the agency had approximately 7,600 full-time personnel protecting the public health in federally-inspected establishments nationwide. FSIS inspection program personnel performed antemortem and postmortem inspection procedures at approximately 1,100 slaughter establishments to ensure public health requirements were met in the processing of over 46 billion pounds of livestock carcasses, almost 57 billion pounds of poultry carcasses, and about 4.4 billion pounds of liquid egg products. In FY 2006, FSIS inspection program personnel also conducted over eight million procedures to verify that establishments met food safety and wholesomeness requirements. In addition, during FY 2006, approximately 3.9 billion pounds of meat and poultry and about 5.9 million pounds of egg products were presented for import inspection at U.S. ports and borders. FSIS also has Program Investigators nationwide, who conduct food safety, food defense, and outbreak investigations and enforcements.

As I mentioned earlier, the current food safety system, while strong, must evolve in order to meet the ever-changing realities of food safety and public health. I can't say it enough: science informs and drives our policies. Science was the catalyst for the Pathogen Reduction/Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (PR/HACCP) rule, as well as our risk-based pathogen control strategies. All of these strategies have the common public health goal of reducing foodborne illnesses by focusing more on riskier products and processes, and identifying and correcting potential problems.

During FY 2006, FSIS continued to build upon its science- and risk-based activities to enhance public health protection. This past year, the agency focused on the realization of a comprehensive, risk-based approach that is formed by an enhanced and more robust risk-based inspection system, and supported by both a public health data infrastructure and an outreach effort to stakeholders. The overall goal of this effort is to further enhance and strengthen public health, and maintain the public's confidence in the safety of the Nation's food supply.

Enhanced Risk-Based Inspection System

FSIS envisions a system under which the agency will capture and utilize data to determine the level of inspection at processing plants. The allocation of agency resources under risk-based inspection at each inspected processing establishment will rely upon two measures of risk: (1) inherent risk, a measure of the risk posed to the public health by each type of processed meat or poultry product (including the volume of each product produced), and (2) risk control, a measure of the amount of actual risk control achieved by each establishment.

Under an optimal system, the type and intensity of inspections at an establishment will be based on the establishment's performance, the items it produces, and the process it uses. Plants with excellent food safety records, validated effectiveness in science-based policies, and in full compliance with FSIS' regulations, should benefit from their track record. The converse should warrant increased attention. FSIS' goal is to anticipate problems, recognize them early, and correct them before regulatory enforcement action is ever needed. The agency will work to prevent problems before they occur.

FSIS is proposing to begin risk-based inspection in 30 prototype processing locations, where the system will initially be monitored and studied before the agency considers expanding to other processing locations in the United States. Of those 30, 20 locations will use team inspection and the remaining 10 will be patrol assignments covered by a single inspector. It is important to note that the processing plants could be producing different kinds of product with different levels of risk. Having both team and individual assignments will help the agency to get a fuller understanding of the issues that may arise as we move forward.

FSIS will work with the Union, the National Joint Council of Food Inspection Locals, pursuant to the parties' labor-management agreement. We will also work with the National Association of Federal Veterinarians and the Association of Technical and Supervisory Professionals to gather input regarding the changes that may affect their work.

FSIS inspection program personnel at prototype processing locations will be provided a "level of inspection" that is required for each processing establishment. The level of inspection at

individual establishments will be determined by their level of risk. For the prototype processing locations that pose greater risk, inspectors will perform more inspection procedures compared to those currently scheduled. At processing plants that pose the least risk, inspectors will perform fewer procedures. For processing plants that have average risk, the number of inspection procedures normally carried out will be approximately the same as the number scheduled today.

FSIS inspection personnel will be utilizing existing data and inspection methods in the prototype locations. To determine which systems pose a greater risk, a risk algorithm or mathematical formula is being developed that would be used to determine the level of inspection that needs to be performed in a processing plant.

This risk algorithm combines data on the inherent hazards associated with different types of processed products, the volume of the processed products produced by an establishment, food safety recalls, enforcement actions, public health significant noncompliance records, pathogen testing results, the processing plant's ready-to-eat alternative and *Salmonella* verification category, and verified food safety consumer complaints.

As the agency gains experience from the initial prototype processing locations, we expect that the number of prototype processing locations will expand and more inspection personnel will be trained to operate successfully in this new, more robust risk-based environment. FSIS proposes to conduct this expansion throughout calendar year 2007, in up to 150 locations.

It is expected that by mid-September, evaluations and assessments will be underway. FSIS will be carefully monitoring how well the system is being implemented in the prototype processing locations. Data will be collected in both the near and long-term future to measure how successful this more dynamic risk-based inspection system for processing is in achieving the agency's desired public health goal of preventing potential foodborne hazards from reaching consumers. Additionally, based on evaluations in the prototype locations, FSIS will make recommendations on how to improve the system for all processing establishments.

As we move toward a more robust, risk-based inspection system, our goal is to ensure that we receive input from all stakeholders (industry, employees, and consumers) during every step of the implementation process. We need to ensure that all of our food safety partners and stakeholders are aware of one another's expectations and goals, and have had an opportunity to provide input on our vision of a more robust, risk-based inspection system.

FSIS selected the consulting firm Resolve, Inc., to assist the agency with communications and opinion gathering, and to utilize the National Advisory Committee on Meat and Poultry Inspection (NACMPI) Subcommittee on Risk-Based Inspection in providing regular, ongoing feedback from stakeholders. Resolve, Inc., solicited input from all of the agency's stakeholders, and managed a two-day public meeting this fall at George Mason University. In addition, the agency is currently planning a series of technical summits on various topics, as well as employee town hall meetings and feedback sessions, updates in our employee and constituent newsletters, as well as other feedback mechanisms.

Public Health Data Infrastructure

FSIS envisions an enhanced risk-based inspection system in which the agency will capture and utilize data to determine the level of inspection at processing plants. The foundation for such a system is data. Every year, our employees deal with larger and larger amounts of data. We must better organize these data into a structure that will optimize our ability to collect, analyze and respond to the data, so that we make better informed, proactive decisions to protect public health and save lives. FSIS is building a public health data infrastructure that will allow us to collect and manage our data in a readily-accessible data warehouse, and permit decisions to be more traceable, measurable and easily audited.

What are the implications for food safety? With a new public health data infrastructure, we will have a greater ability to analyze our existing data. It means these data, as well as additional data that will constantly flow into the system, will be easier to access and analyze in order to identify trends. It also means that we will have the ability to look at different types of data at the same time, letting us see a more complete picture of what is happening in each establishment, each district, and across the Nation. The data infrastructure we are building is the essential foundation to our continued improvement as a public health agency.

The development of this public health data infrastructure has already begun. We are starting with solid data, such as in-plant verification activities, noncompliance records, and recalls. Many other types of data and information will be entered into the system as well, such as food safety assessments, verified consumer complaints, and even inquiries to the agency's Technical Service Center. However, as we build this infrastructure, we face some challenges. For

example, we must make sure the data we have are housed in one warehouse so that it can be used by different programs and for different purposes. Previously, our data was housed in separate databases that were in a sense “owned” by individual programs. The result was a stovepipe system that severely limited the usefulness of the data we collected.

As we move forward, we envision a feedback loop, in which data enters from a variety of sources and can be quickly integrated and analyzed to determine what risk-based decisions and changes are needed in areas such as inspection verification activities, the design and implementation of policies, employee training, and outreach to the industry. For example, if we find that training on a specific new requirement does not seem to be working, we can refer to our data to better distinguish whether the training itself is flawed, whether there is a problem with the delivery of the training nationwide, or whether there is a problem with the delivery of the training in one area of the country. Being able to more specifically identify the cause of a problem allows us to more easily fix it.

Protecting public health in this day and age means being able to make necessary decisions based on real-time data during food safety and food defense emergencies. FSIS must be able to access its own data, as well as data from all of its food safety partners through Web-based business intelligence tools that analyze and display data in terms of performance measures and projected outcomes. Using technology to assist the agency in identifying problems and predicting possible outcomes will enable us to act on the information with a more targeted and effective response. This system must be secure and have full back-up and failover sites that can come online automatically should all or a part of the system be overloaded or fail. By using all of the data

and tools available, these systems can be used to analyze and provide food safety and food defense information more quickly and comprehensively than by humans alone.

Of course, FSIS needs the technology to make this infrastructure work. We are exploring all technologies that can help us move data faster to save lives. With our workforce dispersed across the country, we may have to use different technology depending on what is available in different parts of the country. As new technologies become available, we will adjust accordingly as funding allows.

Building the Data Infrastructure

Although we have a long way to go before our data is fully integrated, FSIS has already made better use of technology to collect, analyze and respond to data. In FY 2006, FSIS built a data warehouse, so that significant portions of data are contained in one central location and multiple systems are able to draw from it.

The groundwork for FSIS' public health data infrastructure strategy includes installing high-speed lines in FSIS base plants, establishments from which inspection program personnel, including patrol inspectors, operate on a daily basis. With high-speed connections at all base plants, FSIS will be equipped with a fully-integrated, real-time data infrastructure that gives the agency the ability to instantly detect and respond to abnormalities or weaknesses in the system to best safeguard public health and ensure food safety and food defense.

At the beginning of the project to move to high-speed connections, only 245 livestock slaughter establishments utilized high-speed lines, while nearly 90 percent of all FSIS-inspected establishments communicated via dial-up technology, which is less reliable, less efficient, and could leave the public more vulnerable in the case of a food safety emergency due to potentially delayed response-times. Now, in addition to the 245 slaughter establishments, 713 of the hardest-to-reach processing establishments have been upgraded through the use of satellite-based broadband. These establishments were targeted first because other forms of broadband were not available at those locations. The agency expects to connect the rest of the base establishments in calendar year 2007.

Collecting and Using Data in a Risk-Based System

Food Safety Assessments

In FY 2006, specially-trained FSIS personnel conducted 1,500 focused food safety assessments (FSAs) at establishments nationwide, using scientific assessment protocols. Data obtained from FSAs help FSIS to determine the adequacy of the design of food safety systems in regulated establishments. This way, the agency is able to target its outreach and education efforts to establishments with a higher level of risk, and ensure that everyone is meeting the same requirements and maintaining well-designed food safety systems.

AssuranceNet

FSIS is using data to measure performance in the field. FSIS' AssuranceNet, a state-of-the-art, Web-based management control system, pulls inspection data from five databases using the previously-mentioned data warehouse. FSIS implemented the first phase of AssuranceNet in FY

2006 to address its operations in the field, and the agency will be expanding the network to other program areas in the future. It is a system that allows FSIS to monitor whether the agency's inspection activities at all levels are meeting over 50 performance measures in near real time.

Technical Service Center

In FY 2006, FSIS' Technical Service Center (TSC) began more systematically collecting, categorizing, and analyzing customer queries for analysis. TSC reviews emerging patterns in these data to improve customer service. For example, TSC determines whether new policies need further clarification. If the TSC identifies confusion about a policy via customer questions, they issue questions and answers to help eliminate or resolve potential uncertainties.

The TSC also issues Interactive Knowledge Exchanges (IKEs), which explain policies in plain language, using real-life regulatory scenarios. For example, in November 2006, FSIS published IKE Scenario 09-06 on verification procedures involving *E. coli* O157:H7 to illustrate a previous notice. This IKE was intended to assist inspection program personnel in verifying that establishments are reacting appropriately to sampling data on the prevalence of *E. coli* O157:H7 in raw ground beef. In FY 2006, FSIS published seven IKEs on the agency's Web site for use by employees, consumers and industry.

Consumer Complaint Monitoring System

FSIS has worked to improve the collection of information from consumers via the Consumer Complaint Monitoring System (CCMS), a national surveillance system that records, analyzes, and tracks consumer complaints, identifying possible food hazards and terrorist attacks on the

food supply. In FY 2006, CCMS recorded 954 consumer complaints, with approximately 150 resulting in further investigation.

When consumers with a food safety concern contact an FSIS district office or the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline, the information they provide is entered into CCMS by FSIS personnel. In addition to direct input from consumers, CCMS receives information from the National School Lunch Program, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and through State and local departments of health and agriculture. The system allows FSIS to analyze complaints from across the country, and identify and respond rapidly to developing situations.

FSIS is currently working to enhance the analytic and reporting capabilities of CCMS, to include 24-hour-a-day coverage, decision trees, and alerts systems. CCMS will have an analytical modeling tool that will improve FSIS' ability to detect the introduction of intentional or unintentional food contamination. The system also will collect enough information to assist FSIS with traceback or trace forward investigations to better identify the origin of food products and/or hazards.

Microbiological Sampling

FSIS' verification sampling is yet another method the agency uses to collect data, and is a good example of how we have taken a more risk-based approach in processing plants. Under the agency's verification sampling program, FSIS samples meat, poultry and egg products and analyzes them for the presence of microbial pathogens. However, the agency has paid particular

attention to *E. coli* O157:H7 in raw ground beef and *Salmonella* in raw meat and poultry products.

As one part of the agency's verification sampling program, FSIS collects and analyzes samples of raw meat and poultry product for *Salmonella*. Each year an estimated 1.4 million people in the United States develop foodborne illness due to *Salmonella* organisms. Since FSIS' implementation of HACCP and other efforts focused at pathogen reduction, the overall incidence of foodborne illness in the United States from *Salmonella* has decreased, but it is still significantly above the CDC's Healthy People 2010 target.

In response to this continued foodborne threat, in February 2006, FSIS announced an 11-point, risk-based strategy for *Salmonella* reduction in raw products. The initiative includes targeting resources at establishments with higher levels of *Salmonella* and changes the reporting and utilization of FSIS' *Salmonella* verification data test results. Where FSIS has performed targeted FSAs in establishments that have continually failed to control *Salmonella*, the results have already shown a dramatic reduction in the level of *Salmonella*. Therefore, we know that these establishments can indeed control the occurrence of *Salmonella* in the raw products they produce. Between February 2006 and the end of February 2007, FSIS' Enforcement, Investigations and Analysis Officers have completed approximately 30 targeted FSAs as part of this initiative.

We have also employed the risk-based approach to combat *Listeria monocytogenes* (*Lm*). Under our routine *Lm* Risk-Based (*RLm*) Sampling Program, FSIS tailors its verification

activities to the interventions that plants choose to adopt and to the potential for *Listeria* growth in their products. Thus, FSIS conducts less sampling in those plants that have the best control programs for *Listeria* and more sampling, as well as in-depth FSAs, in plants that adopt less vigorous programs.

In March 2006, FSIS issued Directive 10,240.5, which provides for the routine (not-for-cause) risk-based testing for the presence of *Lm* in establishments that produce ready-to-eat products. In addition to combined intensified testing for *Lm*, specially-trained FSIS personnel will conduct FSAs in these establishments. Under the *RLm* program, FSIS will complete 100 reviews by March 2007. In future years, FSIS intends to double the number of reviews to 200 per year.

Microbiological Baseline Studies

Over the next several years, FSIS will conduct a series of recurring, nationwide baseline studies of raw beef, pork, chicken, and turkey products. These baseline studies are designed to provide FSIS and the regulated industry with data concerning the prevalence of selected foodborne pathogens and microorganisms that serve as indicators of process control. This group of data will enable the agency and industry to target interventions that effectively reduce the presence of foodborne pathogens found in FSIS-regulated products. In addition, these baseline studies will provide essential data for future risk assessments and permit the evaluation of trends.

Beginning in August 2005 and continuing through December 2006, FSIS conducted the first of five baseline studies for components of raw ground beef, examining the level of foodborne pathogens and indicator microorganisms in beef trim destined for grinding. In September 2005,

FSIS awarded a contract to a third-party laboratory to perform the microbial analyses for other baseline studies on young chicken carcasses, turkey carcasses, swine carcasses and other raw meat and poultry products. Each product class will be examined for a number of foodborne pathogens and indicator microorganisms. FSIS also validated the methodology for a young chicken baseline study and a young turkey baseline study. In November 2006, FSIS began sampling for *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* among young chicken carcasses, which we will quantify and serotype. We will begin sampling for turkey carcasses in spring 2007.

Risk Assessments

During FY 2006, FSIS completed several mid- and long-term quantitative microbial risk assessments to guide the agency in developing regulations and efficiently allocating agency resources. For example, FSIS completed and held a public meeting about an updated version of the 2001/2003 Harvard bovine spongiform encephalopathy risk assessment, which incorporates more current scientific information, includes improvements in model function and reliability, and was revised based on independent peer-reviewed input. The agency also developed a quantitative risk assessment for *Salmonella* in raw beef and poultry, which provides the scientific basis for FSIS' *Salmonella* strategy.

Using Data in Coordination with Food Safety Partners

In order to collect, analyze and respond to the broadest possible range of data effectively and efficiently, FSIS collaborates with Federal, State, local, and even international food safety partners. The agency coordinates with various domestic and international organizations in its

efforts to protect the U.S. food supply, gather input from stakeholders and improve food safety. One very good example of FSIS' collaboration is in the area of food defense.

Food Defense

While FSIS' infrastructure protecting the food supply from intentional and unintentional threats is strong, the agency is working to fully integrate the food defense system – such as our early detection and warning system – into our larger public health data infrastructure. This is necessary because the safety and defense of the U.S. food supply requires that we not only effectively analyze the information we collect in federally-inspected plants and import establishments, but that we communicate daily, in real time, with our food safety and food defense partners. Our food defense systems that will be feeding data into the public health data infrastructure will enable the agency – across all program areas and across the country – to detect and respond early and easily to any problem within the food supply, whether it is an intentional or unintentional attack. It is because of this vision, and in accordance with Homeland Security Presidential Directives-3, 5, 7, and 9, and the Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-188), that FSIS has joined forces with agencies across the Federal government to ensure it is prepared to prevent, respond to, and recover from large-scale food emergencies and intentional contamination.

Homeland Security Presidential Directive-3 established a threat advisory system to effectively communicate the level of risk of a terrorist attack to the American people. It prescribes that agencies develop appropriate “protective measures” in response to each of the five established threat levels. FSIS' measures include active surveillance through a series of food defense

verification procedures performed daily in all FSIS-regulated facilities that are open for business, including import inspection facilities and in-distribution facilities at certain frequencies based on the threat level to identify potential weaknesses in food defense systems of meat, poultry, and egg producers. The agency collects and analyzes results from the verification procedures, and documents potential weaknesses and actions taken by the establishments to address them in a Memorandum of Interview (MOI). MOIs are analyzed and the results influence FSIS' outreach, guidance initiatives, and countermeasures development.

FSIS is a leader in creating the Non-Routine Incident Management System, which will provide a common operating environment and facilitate coordinated communication and response activities across FSIS; with Federal, State, and local partners; and with industry and consumers. The system will provide quicker information sharing as well as aid in notifying response personnel and capturing response activities.

In order to better respond to an intentional attack or a large-scale food safety emergency involving meat, poultry, and egg products, FSIS conducts food defense tabletop exercises. These exercises offer FSIS the opportunity to test and validate standard operating procedures and directives for responding to non-routine incidents. These tabletop exercises also provide the framework for Federal, State and local government agencies, the food industry, and consumer groups to work together to detect, respond to, and recover from a non-routine incident involving the food supply. In FY 2006, FSIS conducted six table-top exercises throughout the country, involving over 300 participants.

FSIS continues to protect the Nation's food supply by ensuring the security of food entering the United States. At the headquarters level, FSIS established a Hazard Evaluation Committee (HEC) to evaluate the potential public health implications of illegal foreign product discovered in commerce. Available 24 hours a day, the HEC provides guidance to FSIS field personnel on dispositions and further actions to be taken.

In FY 2006, FSIS and U.S. Customs and Border Protection's (CBP) National Targeting Center developed rule sets for targeting high-risk, FSIS-regulated shipments entering the country. The rule sets are based on FSIS' vulnerability assessments, the eligibility of foreign countries and establishments, and individuals and companies with a past history of food-safety violations. FSIS conducted a two-month pilot at the ports of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Houston, Texas, to test the rule sets and the procedures developed for handling and testing potentially high-risk shipments. During the pilot, a total of 3,229 shipments were screened at the two ports. Of those, 52 shipments had rule set scores high enough for concern, but only three required further investigation to verify that the manufacturer or product did not pose a risk to the U.S. public.

To further protect the U.S. food supply, FSIS closely collaborated with USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service and Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS), FDA, CBP, and about 20 other Federal government agencies in support of the International Trade Data System (ITDS). ITDS is an integrated, government-wide system that will link importers, exporters, and other government agencies in a single-window electronic interface for processing import and export transactions. It will help USDA streamline its import and export regulatory processes and

improve control over imported meat, poultry, and egg products. FSIS actively participates with officials at other participating government agencies to produce detailed business requirements for the Nation's import inspection process. FSIS also met with the governments of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand in support of electronic certification, a key component of the ITDS project.

FSIS investigators and Import Surveillance Liaison Officers partnered with members of the Department of Homeland Security – including CBP, the U.S. Coast Guard, FDA, APHIS' Smuggling Interdiction and Trade Compliance Office, State Fish and Wildlife Services, and others, for large scale investigations in 12 States. These operations focused on detecting and removing illegally imported products from commerce, and have helped to forge key relationships through which FSIS investigators can be alerted to further cases of illegally imported products.

The agency focuses on stopping illegal shipments at their point of entry, before they enter into commerce. When meat and poultry imports enter the United States, FSIS import inspectors ensure that each shipment is properly certified, examine each lot for general condition and labeling, and conduct reinspection as directed by a centralized computer system, the Automated Import Information System. FSIS is working with CBP to enhance the flow of vital information to strengthen its food safety system against intentional attacks through its Automated Commercial Environment system.

While we have made extensive efforts to protect our borders from illegal and adulterated food, food defense begins at home. Our FY 2008 food and agriculture defense budget request focuses

on the Food Emergency Response Network (FERN). FERN is a joint FSIS-FDA effort of national, State, and local laboratories to provide ongoing surveillance and monitoring of food and to promptly respond to a foodborne illness outbreak or intentional contamination that targets the Nation's food supply. In addition, FERN is a critical source of data for our public health data infrastructure.

FERN enables FSIS to utilize State and local laboratories in handling the numerous samples required to be tested in the event of an attack on the food supply, a natural outbreak, or even a hoax, involving a meat, poultry, or egg product. It is vital for the agency to respond rapidly to such emergencies to not only protect the public's health, but also to ensure public confidence in the safety of the food supply. The first line of this rapid response is the laboratories, which must be provided with training, methodology, and state-of-the-art laboratory equipment.

FSIS currently has cooperative agreements with 18 labs to conduct microbiological testing in the event of a food safety emergency. With the requested increase for FY 2008, FSIS will add seven microbiological labs for a total of 25. In addition, FSIS will use the resources to equip, train and integrate the participating FERN labs.

The 25 labs would provide national coverage, by region, with the expertise needed to meet the overall mission of FERN. When fully operational, all 25 labs would be capable of providing screening tests and results for the 10 priority threat agents in all food matrices. In addition to screening facilities, approximately 15 of these 25 labs would also serve as technical transfer labs, sharing knowledge and expertise. All 25 labs would be funded to participate in screening

projects, method validation studies, and confirmatory testing labs for field trials of new methods for other threat agents. This type of public health infrastructure would be far better prepared to respond to a contaminated food supply, and would benefit the physical and financial health of the Nation.

Outreach to Domestic and International Stakeholders

A critical part of FSIS' regulatory role includes educating stakeholders. Whether those stakeholders are small and very small plants, consumers, trading partners, or States, all groups must have access to the latest food safety information.

Small and Very Small Plant Outreach Program

For FSIS' more robust risk-based inspection system to be successful, all plants must have well-designed food safety and food defense systems. To that end, we have been enhancing our outreach efforts, especially to small and very small plants, to ensure that all establishments nationwide meet the same requirements. We are significantly changing the dynamic of our workforce in order to improve our outreach efforts in this area. It is clear to us from our existing communication efforts that effective outreach can lead to important changes in food safety designs by industry. For instance, the agency's practice of sending Enforcement, Investigations, and Analysis Officers (EIAOs) to small and very small plants prior to FSAs to explain what an FSA entails and what EIAOs are looking for when conducting them has resulted in small and very small plants that are better prepared and have better designed HACCP plans.

Our EIAOs understand their important role in outreach and have the necessary skills to carry it out. After all, they're on the ground and in the best position to help strengthen a plant's food safety systems. In July 2006, we started EIAO outreach as a pilot program with a small number of establishments. Between July and October 2006, EIAOs visited 250 plants. However, the program quickly drew considerable interest, so we expanded it to include all establishments. As a result, between November 2006 and the end of February 2007, our EIAOs visited over 350 plants in this new aspect of our outreach efforts.

FSIS has taken a multi-pronged approach in order to ensure small and very small plants have the information they need to be successful. In FY 2006, the agency held outreach and listening sessions for owners and operators of small and very small plants, as well as State-inspected meat and poultry plants, throughout the country, reaching 725 people. In addition, approximately 200 people participated in two food defense Web-cast workshops geared toward small and very small plants. FSIS also participated in a strategy session hosted by the International HACCP Alliance to further identify the needs of small and very small plants.

In May 2006, for the first time, FSIS began conducting regulatory education sessions to bring small and very small plant owners and operators together with inspection personnel to hear a common message about FSIS regulations. The sessions were part of the *FSIS Strategic Implementation Plan for Strengthening Small and Very Small Plant Outreach*. During FY 2006, FSIS conducted 16 sessions, serving a total of 653 participants from industry, FSIS, State, and other constituent groups. Due to the success of this initiative, FSIS plans to expand the number

and type of sessions offered to assist small and very small plants in understanding the regulatory program.

FSIS developed a coordinated, easily accessible, consistent, and customer-oriented outreach program that provides small and very small plants with “one-stop” service for obtaining information, technical assistance, and answers to achieve compliance and promote food safety and food defense. In order to provide consistent answers to technical regulatory questions, the agency provides a toll-free phone number with special representatives designated to assist owners and operators of small and very small plants. Furthermore, FSIS established a Small and Very Small Plant Outreach Web page with assistance specifically designed to meet the needs of small and very small plants, and last year, FSIS developed and distributed more than 11,000 HACCP and food safety resource materials and three separate mailings of guidance materials to more than 7,500 plant owners and operators and State HACCP coordinators and partners.

Ultimately, making certain that the Nation’s food supply is safe makes good business sense as well as good public health. We realize plant owners and operators must have the necessary tools for success. Likewise, plant owners and operators must embrace HACCP and take advantage of the educational opportunities and tools that FSIS makes available to them.

Consumer Outreach Program

The agency is committed to educating consumers as another means of preventing foodborne illness. FSIS has done this in several ways. Education complements a strong regulatory program.

First, as a result of recommendations from the National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Foods Subcommittee on Consumer Guidelines for the Safe Cooking of Poultry Products, FSIS announced a single safe minimum internal temperature of 165 °F for poultry to provide a margin of safety against pathogens such as *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, and viruses including avian influenza.

Because listeriosis is a serious, potentially fatal disease, the agency continued to educate consumers on the risk of listeriosis in pregnant women, since they are one of the more vulnerable populations. FSIS distributed plain language flyers, “Listeriosis and Pregnancy: What is Your Risk? Safe Food Handling for a Healthy Pregnancy,” in English and Spanish to more than 48,000 obstetricians and gynecologists nationwide, resulting in a total distribution last year of over 100,000 of these informative brochures.

The agency makes food safety information available via telephone or e-mail at USDA’s Meat and Poultry Hotline. During FY 2006, the Hotline responded to more than 84,500 telephone and 1,848 e-mail inquiries on the safe storage, preparation, and handling of meat, poultry, and egg products.

FSIS’ Web site received nearly 35 million hits in FY 2006, compared with over 21 million hits in FY 2005. Among these visitors were those who visited the virtual representative, “Ask Karen.” Through “Ask Karen,” a highly cost-effective tool of outreach and education available on the Internet around the clock, the agency provided answers to more than 7,000 visitors posing more

than 24,000 questions. Consumers may ask questions of the automated representative through an extensive database of frequently updated questions and answers, and receive responses about safely storing, preparing, and handling meat, poultry, and egg products.

To further combat and prevent foodborne illness, in September 2006, FSIS held a one-of-a-kind Food Safety Education conference in Denver on reaching at-risk audiences. This conference brought public health to the forefront of food safety, and brought together participants from around the world. At the conference, FSIS launched the Be Food Safe campaign, in cooperation with the Partnership for Food Safety Education (the Partnership), FDA, and CDC, based on nationwide research conducted by the Partnership, which proved the effectiveness of the campaign's message of "clean, separate, cook and chill." Simultaneously, the agency unveiled a series of "at-risk" brochures with similar content targeting specific groups, such as transplant recipients, cancer patients, diabetics, and those with HIV/AIDS. With one in five Americans deemed to be "at-risk," such a targeting strategy is a crucial part of FSIS' outreach efforts. This program is not about reaching the average consumers. It is about reaching the most vulnerable ones.

FSIS' effort to reach vulnerable groups also includes driving our food safety partners to research food safety topics such as how pathogens are evolving and how best to control them. Research is an essential complement to strong science-based regulatory policies and education programs to combat foodborne illness. It is important that FSIS' regulations and outreach efforts are firmly rooted in the best, and latest, available science.

Codex Alimentarius Commission

FSIS' stakeholder outreach extends to the international stage as well. The Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex), established in 1963, is the joint food standards program of two United Nations organizations, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization. Its main purpose is to protect the health of consumers and to encourage fair international trade in food through the development of food standards, codes of practice and other guidelines. Codex has membership from more than 170 Nations and meets every year to adopt standards, codes of practice and guidelines. In addition, Codex subsidiary bodies hold meetings on a regular basis throughout the year.

The U.S. Codex Office is located within FSIS, presided over by the Office of the Under Secretary for Food Safety. Through Codex, FSIS plays a leading role in setting international food safety standards and guidelines. FSIS remains committed to working through Codex to strengthen the role of science in setting these international food safety standards.

FSIS coordinates the development of U.S. positions on Codex issues with several partner agencies, including the Foreign Agricultural Service; the Agricultural Marketing Service; the Grain Inspection, Packers, and Stockyards Administration; the Food and Nutrition Service's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion; the Agricultural Research Service; the Environmental Protection Agency; the Department of Commerce's National Marine Fisheries Service and International Trade Agency; the Department of State; the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative; FDA; and CDC.

State Meat and Poultry Inspection Programs

In cooperation with State government, FSIS recently completed a comprehensive review of all 28 State meat and poultry inspection (MPI) programs. The State review process consisted of a two-phase review for determining whether State MPI programs meet statutory requirements “at least equal to” those of the Federal program. The first phase was an annual review of the States’ self-assessment submissions. The second phase was an on-site review to verify the accuracy and implementation of the States’ self-assessment submissions.

In January 2007, FSIS issued a summary report and individual State reports on its findings, and posted all of these reports on the agency’s Web site. FSIS reported that all 28 State programs provided adequate documentation to support an initial “at least equal to” finding. Combining these initial findings with results from on-site reviews conducted between 2003 and 2006, FSIS determined that 27 of 28 State programs supported an “at least equal to” determination. New Mexico was deferred, pending verification of their implementation of corrective actions.

Training

Training has been and continues to be a top priority for FSIS. It is the foundation of our public health successes and a key element in our strategy to meet the Healthy People 2010 goals. FSIS can only achieve its public health, food safety, and food defense missions with a well-prepared workforce. Through scientific and technical training that reflects the agency’s risk-based approach to food safety and food defense, we can accomplish this. FSIS has made a number of improvements in employee training, thereby increasing workforce capability and advancing our public health goals.

In FY 2006, FSIS has continued to bring trainers closer to the workforce to make training more regionally based. This enabled the agency to deliver training faster and more efficiently to employees entering mission-critical occupations, making it possible for them to become fully functional in performing their public health duties.

FSIS' Food Safety Regulatory Essentials (FSRE) training program has equipped inspection program personnel in verifying an establishment's HACCP system. Customized HACCP training is then provided based on the types of products being produced at the establishments where inspectors are assigned. Approximately 1,400 FSIS employees received FSRE training in FY 2005, 1,500 received the training in FY 2006, and an additional 1,500 are slated to complete this customized job-training program in FY 2007. We continue to provide specialized training to our Public Health Veterinarians (PHVs). In fact, in calendar year 2004, for the first time, this training was required as a condition of employment, meaning that employees had to successfully complete the curriculum in order to remain in our workforce. Since being launched in FY 2004, over 400 PHVs have participated in the nine-week class. We plan to hold six PHV training classes in FY 2007, reaching an additional 165 FSIS veterinarians. State inspection personnel also take advantage of FSIS courses. In FY 2006, 124 State inspection personnel students took FSRE training, 10 took EIAO training, 4 took PHV training, and 14 took food inspector training.

To ensure that employees who received FSRE training in previous fiscal years maintain their knowledge about verifying the effectiveness of an establishment's food safety system, the Web-based FSRE refresher course was introduced and assigned to Consumer Safety Inspectors in

2006. The course updates inspectors' food safety skills, and helps prepare them for their roles in an enhanced risk-based inspection system.

PHVs undergo training that focuses on the veterinarian's regulatory role in verifying an establishment's food safety system, and prepares them to carry out FSIS' objective of having veterinarians spend 25 percent of their time on public health assessment and assurance. In FY 2006, 179 State and Federal PHVs completed this rigorous nine-week program.

FSIS provides training on EIAO methods to verify the design of establishments' food safety systems for scientific validity. The food safety assessments conducted using these methods have been critical in monitoring establishments' implementation of public health policies related to *E. coli* O157:H7 and *Listeria monocytogenes*. The EIAO training also covers intensified verification sampling, a key component of the agency's risk-based testing. In FY 2006, 114 State and Federal employees completed EIAO training.

E-learning, which includes CD-ROMs, DVDs, Web-casting, and Web-based training, enables FSIS to efficiently provide training on recently issued policies. FSIS is also increasingly using AgLearn, USDA's learning management system, to deliver Web-based training. FSIS had 20 courses offered in an electronic format. Over 5,000 employees received an assignment to take one or more of these courses. Over 14,500 courses were completed electronically. Using this electronic method of training delivery saved the agency hundreds of thousands of travel dollars. Some examples of courses offered in an electronic format included courses on agency policies

regarding export verification and food safety verification procedures. FSIS held its first three scientific seminars through e-learning in FY 2006.

FY 2008 Budget Request

I appreciate having the opportunity to present some of FSIS and the Office of Food Safety's biggest accomplishments and priorities to you. Now, I would like to offer an overview of the FY 2008 budget request for FSIS.

Implementation of these budget initiatives is imperative to helping us fulfill FSIS' public health mission. In FY 2008, FSIS is requesting \$930.1 million.

Maintaining the High Standard in Meat, Poultry & Egg Product Inspections

Key to maintaining our high standard in meat and poultry inspections is the agency's permanent statutory obligation to provide inspection of meat, poultry and egg products. This effort is a labor intensive mandate, thereby making its salary and benefit costs relatively inflexible. An increase for the FSIS inspection program is requested to enhance the safety and wholesomeness of meat, poultry and egg products through effective inspection and policy implementation. This includes funding for a government-wide, mandated 3 percent pay raise for FSIS employees in FY 2008, changes in salaries for FY 2007 and FY 2008, increased costs for benefits, inflationary costs of the State Meat and Poultry Inspection programs, and two extra work days in FY 2008. Failure to provide the full amount for pay and benefit costs jeopardizes the effectiveness of FSIS programs and weakens food safety. In addition to increased costs for pay and benefits, the agency requests an increase to support the increased demand for front-line inspection services,

and a decrease to the public health data infrastructure system (formerly the Field Automation and Information Management Project or FAIM).

Improving the Efficiency & Effectiveness of the Risk-Based Inspection Systems

I have already spoken about our efforts to move to a more robust risk-based inspection system in processing establishments. I would like to point out that we are in the early stages of examining how to implement a risk-based system in slaughter, especially poultry slaughter. At the October 2006 NACMPI meeting, FSIS solicited input from Committee members regarding risk-based inspection for poultry slaughter, and the agency will continue to move forward in a transparent process. It is important to mention that our risk-based inspection proposal for poultry slaughter is cost-neutral for FY 2008.

Food & Agriculture Defense Initiative

We seek an increase for food and agriculture defense, which includes an increase for the Food Emergency Response Network (FERN); for two data systems to support FERN; to enhance laboratory capabilities; to conduct biosecurity training; and additional funds for food security activities such as surveillance and monitoring.

User Fees

Inspection services for the cost of Federal meat, poultry and egg products during all approved shifts are paid with Federal funds, and our budget submission assumes that this will continue. In addition, the Administration will be proposing legislation to provide USDA with the authority to collect new user fees, including a licensing fee and a performance fee. The collection of these

new user fees, which we estimate would amount to \$96 million during FY 2008, would not be available until FY 2009. A total of about \$92 million in licensing fees would be collected from establishments based on their inspection services. An additional \$4 million in performance fees would be collected from establishments that require additional inspection activities for performance failures such as retesting, recalls, or inspection activities linked to an outbreak.

Closing

FSIS will continue to engage the scientific community, public health experts, and all stakeholders in an effort to identify science- and risk-based solutions to public health issues to ensure positive public health outcomes. We will continue to pursue such a course of action in as transparent and inclusive a manner as possible. The strategies I discussed today will help FSIS continue to pursue its goals and achieve its mission of reducing foodborne illness, and protecting public health through food safety and food defense.

Madam Chairwoman, thank you again for providing me with the opportunity to speak with the Subcommittee and submit testimony regarding the steps that FSIS is taking to remain a world leader in public health. I look forward to working with you to continue to improve our food safety system and ensure that the United States continues to have the safest food in the world.